



No portion of this article may be reproduced without
express written permission of Style Publishing Group, LLC.
©2007 • All rights reserved.



Style Publishing Group
P.O. Box 1676
Frisco, Texas 75034
Phone: 972.335.1181
Toll Free: 877.781.7067
Fax: 214.722.2313
E-mail: info@friscostyle.com
Web: www.friscostyle.com

Ad Sales: (972) 335-1306



Mary Conley and Dineen
photo by Leah Ratliff

and when she went to adopt her second Lab, Beau, from a rescue organization, she learned that the rescuer was a puppy raiser. Thinking she needed to wait until her 10-year-old twins were older, she dismissed the idea at the time. However, after coming across a newspaper article in the *Dallas Morning News* explaining how long the waiting lists were for trained service dogs, Mary decided she didn't need to wait to help someone.

"Sometimes I have to explain why I have the dog and most people are very understanding."

Last April, she received eight-week-old Dineen at the Dallas/Ft. Worth airport, transported from California where CCI is based. Flight angels, who are American Airlines flight attendants, donated their time and services to see that the pup arrived safely. Dineen has been with Mary ever since, obediently following her as she runs errands, cheers her kids on during hockey and volleyball games, and even accompanies her in restaurants.

"Sometimes I have to explain why I have the dog and most people are very understanding. If an establishment doesn't feel comfortable having her there, then I wouldn't stay. I haven't had that happen yet," Mary said.

Being a puppy raiser takes a lot of hard work and dedication. There are approximately 30 commands to teach, monthly progress reports to fill out, obedience classes to attend and time devoted daily for feeding, grooming, socializing and exercising according to the specific guidelines set by CCI. The costs associated with puppy raising are the same as with any dog. You pay for their food, grooming and vet bills and

Man's Best Friend Finds More Ways to be Loyal

By Jackie Beynaerts

DINEEN, AN EIGHT-MONTH-OLD LABRADOR/GOLDEN RETRIEVER MIX, waits patiently beside her trainer, Mary Conley from Plano. Occasionally she sits up, lies down, or puts her head in Mary's lap, depending upon which command is sporadically thrown her way. After each one, she is rewarded with a treat and words of praise. Wearing a yellow vest with blue trim, no one approaches us, or asks to pet this adorable pup. We do, however, receive some curious glances. Being a dog-lover myself, it is all I can do to not fall all over Dineen, but I admire her awesome work ethic and keep a respectable distance. Dineen, doesn't

mind the chatter, and easily ignores the chirping birds, the stares, the parking lot filled with cars, and the people darting in and out of Whole Foods, where we are meeting for an interview. She just sits there, focused, attentive and calm. Even at such a young age, she knows that she is at work, and when she goes home and the vest comes off, it is her chance to play.

Mary is a first time puppy trainer for Canine Companions for Independence (CCI), a national non-profit organization that provides and matches trained working dogs to people with disabilities. Having owned labs before, Mary already had a deep appreciation for the breed,

any expenses the dog may incur, such as medical needs. Probably the most heart-wrenching guideline to follow is that after pouring all this time, energy, commitment and love into this puppy for a year to a year and a half, you then have to return it to CCI upon request.

"It's going to be hard," said Mary, who has yet to say goodbye to a puppy. "People who raise five or six dogs say it never gets any easier. But I am raising her for a reason: she has a main purpose. When I see dogs out working, I see what a wonderful job they can do for people; how loyal and dedicated they are."

At around 15 months, puppies are returned to CCI from their puppy raisers and under go x-rays, medical tests and temperament evaluations. To complete the program, dogs train for more than two years. However, only 40 percent of dogs make it through training to be matched with a human partner. Dogs are removed for health, behavioral or temperamental issues. At this point the puppy raiser is given the first opportunity of adopting the dog or the dog can go to a carefully selected home.

When asked if she would adopt Dineen, Mary explained that it would be a hard decision. She would love to, but would also like to continue puppy raising, a feat that would be hard with two labs of her own.

Dogs that are declared fit to continue the program go to a Regional Training Center for six to nine months. During this advanced training course with professional instructors they learn additional commands. Between 19-24 months, dogs are then matched with perspective recipients based on personality needs and abilities.

Finding a match for the recipient can be a long process. It usually takes about a year to receive a dog, but in the case of Kimberlin Holt, a seven-year-old from Arlington who suffers from Cerebral Palsy, it only took eight months. Her Lab/Golden Retriever mix, Cal, is now three years old and has been with the Holt family more than a year.

"The process is long. There is a lot of paperwork, questionnaires, a phone interview, references from doctors, a face-to-face interview and a two-week training course in California," says mom, Kim Holt. "The application fee is only



Dineen

photo by Leah Rattliff

"Today, Cal wears his vest with harness and Kimberlin uses him for balance when she walks to and from school."

\$100, but the trips to California add up. So far, we have spent around \$4,000. The funny thing is, we received Cal in California, but his puppy raiser lives in Irving."

Kim Holt first learned about CCI training dogs when she was at a CHASA retreat. CHASA is a Children's Hemiplegia and Stroke Association, which offers support for children with Hemiplegia, Hemiplegic Cerebral Palsy, Infant Stroke or Childhood Stroke. After going through the initial stage of the process, Kim flew with her three daughters, Kindra, 14, Kelsey, 10, and

Kimberlin, now seven, to California for the two-week training course.

"It was emotionally draining. You take in a lot of information, and it's tiring and stressful because you want to do well. The people there are very nice, and they are there to help you succeed," Kim said.

The first week of training starts around 8 or 9 in the morning and lasts until 5 or 6 p.m. Kim's group was comprised of five people and 11 dogs. They rotate everyone around to find the perfect match. All of the dogs are Labradors, Golden Retrievers, or a mix of the two. By about Thursday of the first week, a match is made.

"At first you see the dogs, and you are like 'oh, I want this one or that color,' but by the time you leave, you like them all and just feel privileged to get one," Kim declared.

By the end of the first week Kimberlin, who was six years old at the time, was matched up with Cal. The second week of training consists of grooming, sleeping and bonding with the recipient. After two weeks of training, there is an exam to take, and upon completion, a graduation ceremony is held.

The ceremony is very special and people from all over California attend. Puppy raisers, who haven't seen their dogs in nine months, come and walk the dogs across the stage, handing them over to the recipient.

Today, Cal wears his vest with harness and Kimberlin uses him for balance when she walks. Cal has been trained to pick things up for her and can even take off her socks with the simple command "socks." He walks her to school, carries her lunch, escorts her home and even sleeps with her.

"Cal has changed Kimberlin's life. He is her best friend and companion," Kim said.

When asked if Mary would make the trip to California if Dineen graduates, her eyes lit up.

"That would be a huge accomplishment," Mary said with pride.

Visit www.caninecompanions.org for more information about Canine Companions for Independence.

Jackie Beynaerts is a freelance writer living in Plano.